

Author offers sober take on stormy future; Novel channels Shakespeare's 'The Tempest' in story about climate and a sparse island

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Byline: Brett Josef Grubisic Special to the Star

Body

With apologies to Shakespeare, the climate is truly out of joint. Catherine Bush infuses every page of "Blaze Island" with alarms about that reality.

The Toronto-based author of "The Rules of Engagement" sets her latest in a familiar North America where unseasonal hurricanes, excessive floods, ravaging wildfires and desiccated fields are an emergent norm. She also adopts "The Tempest" as a template for an earnest, overwrought novel about a "new world" that's anything but full of promise.

At the tale's core stand a conflicted man, his "wondrous daughter" and an unpredictable "castaway" residing in a sparsely populated "ferocious place" on the North Atlantic.

Disgraced but fervent climate scientist Milan Wells is a man with powerful "denier" enemies who's haunted by the death of his wife and deeply contemplative about disturbing climate trends. About a decade earlier, he fled the United States and relocated to Blaze Island, two ferry trips away from Cape Breton. Holed up for long hours in a homemade meteorological lab, he studies and plans. Home-schooled and self-reliant, his sheltered but restless daughter Miranda learns local ways while growing frustrated as she approaches adulthood.

Milan's mysterious young assistant, Caleb Borders, is a dark-skinned young man belittled by island xenophobes. Like Shakespeare's Caliban, he has an unworkable infatuation with a Miranda.

Gradually, Bush reveals that Milan and Caleb are working in secret on the "ARIEL Project"; this tangent of the novel takes the plot in an eco-thriller direction that involves scientists playing God and "Skyspex," a lab-invented nanoparticle whose name evokes Shakespeare's Sycorax. Considering that "The Tempest" is baked into the bones of the novel, the literary gloss it adds seems primarily decorative; "Blaze Island" would not have been damaged by its absence.

With one crashed car and one bumpy flight (on, er, Tempus Airlines) strangers arrive during a heavy gale and disrupt an already fragile equilibrium. For Milan, the strangers represent both retribution and vindication. Meanwhile, as storm winds gust, the beautiful, tattooed Frank, an eco-activist with a wealthy (and villainous) father, awakens Miranda to the strength of her own desires. Though she's fond of the "wildness and freedom" of life on Blaze Island, she begins to chafe against Milan's rigid borders and stern rules.

Atmospheric (no pun intended) and dramatic, "Blaze Island" is largely a diverting tale for our strange days. Offering a sobering forecast about one potential near future, Bush does, however, introduce food for thought about apt responses to our predicament and what sacrifices might need to be made to stabilize the natural world.

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A resident of Salt Spring Island, Brett Josef Grubisic is working on his fifth novel, "My Two-Faced Luck." He teaches at University of British Columbia.

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